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ABSTRACT

Speech education in Arkansas's institutions of higher learning has a long and illustrious history. In 1891, the Arkansas Baptist Association opened Central College for women to students ranging from first grade through college. The curriculum was departmentalized into preparatory, high school, and collegiate levels with a shared faculty for all departments. The college department was a four-year program authorized to award the bachelor's degrees of arts and science. The first faculty consisted of eight teachers, including two sisters who taught elocution. In the 1920s, the title of elocution was changed to expression, reflecting the national scene with the development of speech departments after 1914, and the birth of the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking. Another change was the initiation of the Bachelor of Oratory degree, the only one of its type in Arkansas. The most important change, however, came in 1922, when Central College was designated a junior college. Thereafter, until the school was closed in 1948, the Associate of Arts degree in oratory, or art, was presented to the students. The pedagogical approach to elocution/expression/speech throughout the years from 1892 to 1948 was to treat it as a cocurricular activity. The Central College speech faculty played an important role as leaders of their discipline in the community and at the state level, but their most important influence is very likely the personal and professional encouragement they gave to their students. In 1948 the Arkansas Baptist Association decided to change Central College to a coeducational institution and move the campus to Little Rock. The college was unable to survive the move and was closed permanently in 1950, ending a tradition of nearly 60 years of speech and theatre education. (HTH)

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SPEECH AND THEATRE EDUCATION AT CENTRAL COLLEGE

Glenn Smith

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SPEECH AND THEATRE EDUCATION AT CENTRAL COLLEGE

Glenn Smith*

Speech education in Arkansas' institutions of higher learning has a along and illustrious history. This history needs greater illumination in the form of publication in history and speech journals such as the **Journal of Communication Studies.**[1] It is hoped that the following narrative of the development of speech in the Central College curriculum is enlightening in its contribution to our understanding of the roots of the speech discipline in the state of Arkansas.

Private religious educational institutions in Arkansas are a matter of long record with all major church organizations represented in such schools as Subiaco Academy, Arkansas College, College of the Ozarks, Harding University, Hendrix College, Ouchita University, and others. The liberal arts were normally given a place of importance in the training and education of the young scholar. Learning to speak and read aloud in public were among the leading subjects in the liberal arts curriculum that included music, Latin, mathematics, science, English and art.

In 1891, Stanford Robinson, the founder of Conway, Arkansas donated ten acres of land to the Arkansas Baptist Association to be used as a campus for Central College.[2] The Baptists of Arkansas had determined that there was a need for a school for females despite opposition from the trustees of Ouchita Baptist College, a co-ed institution in Arkadelphia.[3] Ground was broken in the spring of 1892 for the building of Old Main, and the first students enrolled in classes in September of 1892. The student body was unusual in terms of today's methods of segregating students into elementary, junior, senior, and college levels institutions. Central College students ranged from first grade through college ages. The curriculum was departmentalized into preparatory, high school, and collegiate with a shared faculty

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for all departments. The college department was a four year program authorized to award the bachelor's degrees of arts and science.

The first faculty consisted of eight teachers including the president who taught Bible. Laura Phillips was listed as the teacher of music and elocution. She held the two positions until 1896 when Mrs. M. Perry was appointed Lady Principal and teacher in English and elocution. Miss Phillips remained as head of music in that year.[4] Both Miss Phillips and Mrs. Perry were graduates of Lynnland Female College in Kentucky.[5] In addition to having graduated from the Kentucky college, Miss Phillips had studied at the St. Louis and Cincinnati Conservatories. An interesting aside to this early Central College period is the curriculum of Hendrix which listed no study in elocution for the all-male student body.[6]

Miss Eva Edwards Hamilton succeeded Mrs. Stevenson who had come to the faculty in 1900 as the teacher of elocution succeeding Mrs. Perry. Miss Hamilton's arrival is not dated in the chronicles available to the author, but it is surmised that her appointment was made in 1909-10 at the beginning of the presidency of Dr. Conger. Speech training had blossomed by 1911 with the appointment of Miss Hamilton's sister, Martha Sim Hamilton, in 1912 as a colleague in teaching elocution. Miss Eva Hamilton's influence upon the growth of speech training at Central College is evidenced in yearbook references during her years on the faculty. The following is a quotation from her lectures found in the 1912 **Ark.**[7]

> Young ladies, there is more in expression than is dreampt of in your philosophy. All subjects that may be studied are not to be compared to it. It develops the power to see quite through the deeds of man, so that he may not deceive you; to interpret his motives, so that

you may checkmate them; to understand all his moods, so that you may control them, so that he will follow your bidding. The poet has said, "Whoever speaks to me in the right voice, I will follow, as the water follows the moon, anywhere round the globe." Therefore, learn how to speak.

Miss Edwards had graduated from the Boston School of Oratory. She had studied with S. H. Clark in the University of Chicago, and she had been the director of the Department of Public Speaking in the First State Normal of Missouri before accepting the position of Central College.

Special fees were assessed the students for instruction in piano, voice, and elocution. These fees were nominal in today's dollars, but may have represented costly frills to parents of some students in the late nineteenth century. The fact that some parents were willing to pay the extra cost indicates their belief that speaking and reading development were important.

The second decade of the twentieth century brought various changes. In the faculty, Miss Mary Glenn Philips succeeded the Hamilton sisters as teacher of expression. This change in title of the study from elocution to expression reflects the national scene with the development of speech departments after 1914 and the birth of the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking.[8] Another unique change during this period of 1918 to 1929 was the initiation of the Bachelor of Oratory degree. It was the only known degree of its type in Arkansas. The best evidence available suggests the reluctance of contemporary institutions to offer the "B.O."[9] The most important change, however, in this decade came in 1922 when Central College was designated a junior college. The bachelor's degrees were awarded for the last time in May, 1922, and thereafter until the school was closed

in Conway in 1948, the Associate of Arts degrees in oratory, science, or art were presented to the girls of Central College.[10]

Miss Essie Graves was appointed expression teacher in 1929, and she was followed by a succession of new teachers of expression intermittently through the 30s. In 1938 Leslie Irene Coger arrived on the Central College campus as the teacher of speech and drama. She stayed with Central College through the 1942 academic year leaving Conway to assume a similar position at Southwestern State Teachers College in Missouri. Miss Mary Latham taught speech and directed theatre productions during the closing years of Central as a junior college for female education in Conway.

The pedagogical approach to elocution/expression/speech throughout the years from 1892 to 1948 was to treat it as a co-curricular study. The teachers gave lessons individually to students. These sessions ordinarily ran thirty minutes in length and consisted of exercises. One student recalls just how her two lessons each week were spent with the teacher:

> There was a great emphasis on the development of the voice, and we had a great deal of voice work. We learned how to breath from the diaphragm, and we also had physical exercises; so we were developing physically and mentally as well as developing the voice.[11]

Classes during the day were held for public speaking and oral reading but these came later according to the best memories of former students. With the passage of time, particularly in the late 1930s, debate was offered and the students participated in oratorical and one act play contests in Arkansas.[12]

The Central College speech faculty played important roles over a period of time as leaders of their discipline in the community and at times at the state level. Numerous references are found in Central College yearbooks and in the school papers of programs that included readings by Miss Hamilton

or Miss Phillips or Miss Latham. Dr. Coger took a leading part in the work of the Arkansas Speech Association during her five years on the Central faculty including being elected editor of the Association journal. She was unable to carry out the work of editor due to her departure for Springfield at the close of the 1942-43 school year.

The most important influence of the faculty is very likely the personal and professional encouragement they gave to their students. Hettie Dunaway an 1899 graduate, went into the Chautauqua circuit and became well known for her humorous and dramatic readings. Indeed, Ophelia Cannon, Minnie Pearl of Grand Old Opry fame, credits Hettie for her own success as a comedienne.[13] Former students have gone on to be teachers in the speech classrooms of Arkansas, to achieve influence in business and government, and to gain recognition in the social and cultural life of the state. Mrs. Gussie Simpson Scales, class of 1922, taught speech several years in the Conway schools. Nell Pittard, class of 1939, was a leading performer on the Chautauqua circuit. Jean Garner, class of 1940, taught speech in Longview, Texas, and in Perryville and Parkdale, Arkansas. Indeed, the period in Central College's history that could be called its "golden age" in speech and theatre might well be the late 30s and early 40s when students were attracted to the campus by a quality program operated by a teacher who had limited funds but great creative ingenuity.

In 1948 the Arkansas Baptist Association decided to change Central College to a co-educational institution. A part of that change was to move the campus to Camp Robinson in Little Rock. It was unable to survive the move and was closed permanently in 1950. With the passing of Central College, a tradition of nearly sixty years of speech and theatre education was brought to a close.

NOTES

[1]See for example Professor Richard Rea's monograph, **Ninety Years of Academic Growth of Speech Training at the University of Arkansas** in the February, 1983, issue of the **Journal of Communication Studies.**

[2]J. S. Rogers, **History of Arkansas Baptists** (Little Rock: Arkansas Baptist State Convention, 1948), p. 699.

[3]Rogers, p. 699.

[4]**Log Cabin Democrat**, September, 1896.

[5]**Log Cabin Democrat**, September, 1896.

[6]**Log Cabin Democrat**, September, 1896. Evidently the males in society of that day did not need to develop skills in public speaking and oral reading as a part of their college study. Indeed, the Hendrix faculty of that day represented more of the hard sciences and business world concerns and less of the liberal arts.

[7]**The Ark**, Conway: Central College, 1912, p. 17.

[8]Karl R. Wallace, ed., **History of Speech Education in America**, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1954), pp. 490-502.

[9]Personal interview with Mrs. Gussie Simpson Scales, August 5, 1983.

[10]J. S. Rogers, **History of Arkansas Baptists** (Little Rock: Arkansas Baptist State Convention, 1948), p. 703.

[11]Personal interview with Mrs. Gussie Simpson Scales, August 5, 1983.

[12]Personal interview with Dr. Leslie Irene Coger, August 4, 1983. Dr. Coger also directed the physical education program. As director of physical education, Leslie Irene Coger was in charge of the annual May Day Festival. The highlight of the festival was winding the May Pole, and it was quite a chore to get those twelve strands of ribbon wrapped neatly around the pole.

[13]Minnie Pearl and Joan Dew, **Minnie Pearl: An Autobiography**, (New York: Pocket Book Publishers, 1982), pp. 78-82.